

# Armchair Tourism

Other Cultures,  
Other Bodies,  
Local Stages

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

**A**re they ever really naughty? Do they put toads in people's pointe shoes or draw mustaches on photos of Anna Pavlova? The answer is undoubtedly yes, but you'd never know it from looking at the junior contingent of St. Petersburg's Vaganova Ballet Academy. As the sleek-headed little girls line up at the barre on the BAM stage opposite the seniors for a demonstration of classical training, as the four-foot boys march in, toes leading, the vision is not just of charming children, but of ideal decorum. Their skinny legs are well muscled, beautifully articulate; they lift their rib cages high; their arms float free. Such aplomb! They'd look like miniature adults if their disarmingly big feet and the girls' flat chests didn't give them away.

The Academy, once the Imperial Ballet School, is associated with the Kirov Ballet. The program that begins with Konstantin Sergeyev's choreographed class moves on to show off some of the company's soloists: Zhanna Ayupova—distant and crystalline in *Giselle*, Act II, expansive and radiant in the pas de deux from the last act of *The Sleeping Beauty*; her partner Andrian Fadeev with his noble line; Anastasia Volochkova; Viacheslav Samodurov; and Igor Zelensky (looking fabulous, and more at home than he did during his tenure with New York City Ballet). As is usual with the Kirov, legato passages are danced so excruciatingly slowly that the music creaks along and long-dead composers die a little more. But weigh against that the purity of line, the arch of those backs!

The program shows the curve from 10-year-old to professional: the European monarchical vision of harmony and proportion defined as verticality, serenity, and articulate limbs (now often hyperarticulate as women thrust their hips out of alignment to keep up with the international trend toward sky-high extensions). A junior boy advances with double air turns; an intermediate executes remarkably creamy spins; Samodurov launches himself into an almost undecipherable jump. (How did he do that?) It's understandable that the senior boys temporarily lose some of their classical purity, their arm positions lax as they strain to match the virtuosity looming in their future.

**THE TRANSGRESSIVE** form of butoh, which burgeoned in Japan in the late 1950s, sabotages this Western ideal of symmetry, harmony, and erect bearing—as well as traditional Japanese notions of restraint and dignity. Butoh makes a virtue of imperfection; states of darkness cripple the body, distort it, madden it, weaken it from within. Everything seems in flux. The opening image in Ebisu Torii's *Nocturne* is of a woman swathed in brown drapery. You watch her for a long time before she moves, then for a longer time while she darts glances here and there, her hands clawing, her head sinking down into



Outing their inner beasts: Donald Welkert and Sylvain Lafortune of O Vertigo

her shoulders and stretching up again. She might be a sleepy owl waking to the night. It's a shock to realize she's *growing*, gradually becoming 10 feet tall.

In various guises, the four performers of Buto-Sha Tenkei (Heavenly Chickens) pass through a nightmarish neighborhood on prolonged solitary missions; time hunkers down on the sidelines. Yuki Ebine, a Japanese flag on her back, her hair tied in two fluffy bunches, jumps as if on a pogo stick, over and over and over. To salsa music (butoh is typically eclectic in this regard). She's succeeded by Masako Nagano, who walks slowly on all fours, hoof by deliberate hoof, her bare white torso streaked down the spine with red, finally shaking her headdress of tiny bells. Torii, his mostly naked body covered with dark smudges, emerges from a hanging chrysalis—light, unstable, wandering while big-band music plays.

The most miraculous transformations are created by the great Mutsuko Tanaka. Wobbling delicately in a red kimono, she's dwarfish, her torso folding into her legs. In another solo, she begins reeling slowly, bent backward, mouth open. Toward the end of it, she spreads her dark green mantle like wings and runs smoothly, crouched

forward, but the final image is of a grotesque harridan. In her last solo, wearing a gown like a Spanish dancer's, she laughs silently for so long that the laugh seems to be devouring

out of trees at us. The animal behavior isn't constant either. Kenneth Gould walks sagging against Mireille Leblanc; he's wearing a dress with a ball stuffed under it—the male as mother-to-be. Sylvain Lafortune has some wonderful moments looking numbed; life pinches him like his tight, shabby jacket. Tall Anne Barry sometimes joins the rumpus and sometimes wanders through, scribbling: a lady writer among the creatures, with small, wild-haired Laurin veteran Carole Courtois as her familiar.

The bad energy drains away as a taped voice in French recites a litany by Éric Taillefer about bleeding, amputating, uprooting all that does not belong within (“qui n'est pas de moi”) to become winged, to become spirit. But the bodies go soft and quiet for only a minute. Then the inner beasts snarl and rattle their chains.

**ISRAEL'S 28-YEAR-OLD** Kibbutz Dance Theater, which preceded O Vertigo into the Joyce, is based on a kibbutz near the Lebanon border, and its dancers still put in two days of work a week on their home kibbutzim. They undergo compulsory military service. Do these facts have anything to do with their forthright, sturdy performing? Compared to them the dancers of O Vertigo look neurotic, turning their strength against themselves.

Kibbutz's powerful simplicity may also reflect the subject matter. Rami Be'er's stunning *Aide Memoire* is about the aftermath of the Holocaust, about the way memories shape lives. The dancers focus on tasks they must accomplish rather than on their feelings. Although Be'er's parents survived the Holocaust and company founder Yehudit Arnon spent several years in Auschwitz, this work achieves its force through resonant form and movement rather than storytelling. Be'er's brilliant set and lighting channel and sculpt the dancing. Tall panels stand at the back of the stage. People who issue from the interstices between them are already programmed for drill. Small platforms and footholds slide out of the panels when needed. Stepping onto them, crouching on the larger ones, the dancers make you feel how precarious and how hemmed in their existence is. Women slump on these shelves in a pathetic simulacrum of sexual display. Two men on one platform, two women on another, caress, their gestures distorted by the cramped space. One woman, who seems to stand for a vision of hope, sprints from shelf to shelf (perhaps recalling Arnon's Auschwitz dance from bunk to bunk—the only available space).

Small incidents and encounters—tender, enraged, stoic—occur away from the panels too. The bodies speak enigmas. You don't need to know why a man and woman struggle together while another woman sits calmly on his shoulders; the image speaks to the unconscious. And the dancing—real, vital *dancing*—of these 19 people becomes a dynamo for transforming experience and recharging the spirit. ■

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## Toe Tap

**I**t's rare enough to see men in toe shoes. But tap dancing in toe shoes? While playing the harmonica? And doing it all without slapstick but with wit and verve?

David Parker & the Bang Group—appearing in Dance Theater Workshop's Carnival series Thursday and Friday—pull this off in spades. Their toe-shoe extravaganza, *On the Tip of My Tongue*, caps the five-part show. Parker's choreography revels in the difficulty of dancing *en pointe*—the dancers fall to flat feet in hilarious tap rhythm, often while entwined in awkward embraces. In one interlude, Parker and Kathryn Tufano create a four-footed beast that tries to walk on point, but gets mocked by another four-footed beast, Jeffrey A. Kazin, wearing toe shoes on his feet and hands. Most of this is accompanied by harmonica riffs blown by the dancers themselves; in a pas de deux, Kazin and Tufano pass a single mouth organ between them, lips to lips, in a parody of passion.

Parker sees comedy in everything from mundanity to misery. In *Kathy's Solo*, Tufano indulges in what every child (and many an adult) has always desired—stomping on bubble wrap, popping all those plastic pockets. But Parker has just as much fun in *Half Full*, a spoof on, yes, alcoholism. The only music comes from Parker—in Donna Reed drag—running his wet finger around the rim of a brandy snifter, which he does with all the drama of a consummate actor—and queen.

For sophistication, it's hard to top *The Missing Reel*, a tap duet for Parker and Kazin. In blue suits, red ties, and black-and-white penguin shoes, the two men perform a jocular cross between a mating dance and a corporate contest, while chanting lines from Hamlet's “To be or not to be” speech. Every pratfall is perfectly tapped—Kazin even taps while standing on his hands, declaiming Shakespeare—and the piece ends with a surprisingly poignant gesture. The men take off each other's shoes as if disarming themselves, and then lie down to sleep, side by side.

—MARK SCHOOF